

In the Footsteps of Arabic Biographical Literature: A Journey, Unfinished, in the Company of Knowledge

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ARABIC BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE:
A JOURNEY, UNFINISHED, IN THE COMPANY OF KNOWLEDGE

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A Farewell Address

The Oriental Institute
29 May 2009

About fifteen years ago, when I started being flown abroad to meetings, conferences, or lectures, Business Class or First Class, I realized that that meant I was becoming a “senior” scholar—which is another way of saying I was getting perhaps not old, but certainly older. Now seeing you all here to celebrate with me my retirement, I feel “ancient.” The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations would, of course, vehemently object: I am, according to it, not an “ancient” but a “modern!” Imagine me, modern! This does not change things, though: I feel quite ancient now because of your collective decision to participate in celebrating my retirement. There can be no more joy, no more honor, than that.

Now what am I going to talk about? As I am the first to deliver a Farewell Address at our Department at Chicago, I am at a disadvantage, for there is no tradition for me to follow. But, then again, a farewell address is a very personal thing, and maybe even if there were distinguished predecessors to emulate, my task is not really that much easier. So personal it shall be, and new on the Chicago scene. But what, and how?

Well, when I began thinking about what I am going to say, three things were clear to me. First, I would like to say something which is simultaneously personal and shared so that it is meaningful to you and to me. Second, I would like what I say to be within the context of scholarship and the search for knowledge, a context through which I, in large part, exist and to which you certainly relate. And third, I would like what I say to be rooted in some area in the field I work in that is particularly close to my spirit—one whose texts come to life when I read them, make my imagination go in every direction almost unrestrained when I merely look at them, and make me happy as a lark when I contemplate the infinite possibilities for interpreting and using them.

It took me some time to decide what that area was, for there are so many of which I am enamored in early Islamic thought: Qurʾānic commentary and the Qurʾān’s use in literature, theology and sectarianism, history and historiography, manuscripts and papyri, political thought and classical Arabic prose in all its forms, and biographical literature. After some reflection, I thought that premodern Arabic biographical literature is probably the locus around which all the other areas may be seen to coalesce. This is so, because it has brought

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into being, over a millennium and a half, thousands of tomes on people involved in almost all fields of Islamic scholarship: jurists and judges, Qurʾān reciters and commentators, *ḥadīth* transmitters, critics, and theoreticians, theologians and philosophers, grammarians and linguists, litterateurs and poets, statesmen and bureaucrats, physicians and scientists, mystics and ascetics, and storytellers and men with handicaps; even members of this or that city, province, century, or dynasty received dedicated biographical dictionaries. Indeed, Arabic biographical literature is necessary—not only useful—for studying all branches of Islamic thought without exception. Some of you may also recall that I once wrote that biographical dictionaries were “practically a creation” of Islamic civilization, going far beyond the Syriac martyrologies and the biographical components in the Greek, Roman, and Chinese historical literatures,¹ and that they actually reflected the very development of that civilization.² I also argued that the enormous project undertaken by the Muslim scholars and litterateurs to write biographical dictionaries of every imaginable sort amounted to no less than the creation of an alternative history of the Muslim *community*, one that complements the chroniclers’ history of the Muslim *state*.³

But making biographical literature the point of departure for my Farewell Address posed problems, the most obvious of which is that the reputation of Arabic biographies has been hammered by several scholars. These scholars seem to agree that Arabic biographies, especially those included in biographical dictionaries, are rather unimpressive: they are repetitive, formulaic, dry, narrow, impersonal, and do not impart holistic, personalized depictions of individual scholars’ inner selves; some scholars even went as far as saying that Arabic biographies depict not persons but “ideal types” or “models of behavior” who share “somewhat stereotypical generalities.”⁴ A few scholars did indeed come to the defense of the Arabic biographies, noting the role played by anecdotes in shaping them,⁵ while another pointed out the innumerable varieties of form and style a single individual’s biography actually takes in different dictionaries.⁶ Such scholars had to admit, though, that, while the characterization of biographies as depicting individuals as types may be wrong or oversimplified,⁷ there is indeed a tendency in biographical dictionaries to view individuals “in a collectivity.”⁸ But such a feature is easily explainable: the commonalities between groups

¹ See Wadād al-Qāḍī, “Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars’ Alternative History of the Muslim Community,” in *Organizing Knowledge: Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Muslim World*, ed. Gerhard Endress (Leiden, 2006), pp. 27–28, citing, in part, F. Rosenthal and H. A. R. Gibb.

² See Wadād al-Qāḍī, “Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance,” in *The Book in the Islamic World*, George N. Atiyeh, ed. (Albany and Washington, D.C., 1995), pp. 93–122.

³ This is the main argument in my article “Alternative History” cited in n. 1.

⁴ See al-Qāḍī, “Alternative History,” pp. 56–58 and the extensive citations in nn. 61–67.

⁵ See Hartmut Fändrich, “The *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān* of Ibn Khallikān: A New Approach,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, 1973, pp. 432–45; Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Controversy and Its Effects in the Biographical Tradition of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī,” *Studia Islamica* 46, 1977, pp. 115–31; idem, “Dreams,

the Blind, and the Semiotics of the Biographical Notice,” *Studia Islamica* 51 (1980), pp. 137–62. For more on that, see al-Qāḍī, “Alternative History,” n. 68.

⁶ As I tried to show in my article, “Alternative History,” pp. 60–67, by studying the widely varying forms that the biography of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī took in thirteen biographical dictionaries.

⁷ See al-Qāḍī, “Alternative History,” p. 67.

⁸ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton, 1991), p. 190. See also M. J. L. Young, “Arabic Biographical Writing,” in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 170: “. . . prosopography seeks to record a group of individuals having certain features in common, and these individuals are viewed in relationship to the prevailing characteristics of the group.” Cf. Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2001), pp. 41–42.

are needed by the scholars in order to highlight the elements of continuity and homogeneity in their kind of informal, non-establishment history of the Muslim community.⁹ However, even if the scholars made biographical dictionaries have “similar rough structures, similar concerns, and similar areas of investigation,”¹⁰ they certainly did not restrict the specific *contents* of biographies.¹¹ This is how the person who is fortunate enough to be entered in a biographical dictionary will surely have in his entry formulaic and stereotypical phrases that emphasize commonality and even impersonal information that de-emphasizes difference.¹² But most certainly all the biographies of this individual will not be identical in all dictionaries.

The impersonal aspect brings us to another issue in biographical dictionaries, namely how much their biographies reveal of the subject’s “private” life as opposed to his or her “public” life. Now, since biographical dictionaries reflect “important aspects of the intellectual and cultural development of the Islamic community,”¹³ and since they aim at highlighting the roles played by individual scholars in the writing of the history of that community, it is quite understandable that the public face of the individual who gets an entry in a dictionary would be emphasized. This has made some detractors of the genre undermine the Arabic biography as being unconcerned with personal lives and character development; a group of scholars even declared that the entire project of the premodern Arabic biography “tended to downplay and even exclude ‘individuality.’”¹⁴ But here we must keep in mind something very important: such statements have in mind a Western model for the biography; and it is when the Arabic biographies are measured against this model that they are found to be deficient. This is precisely what one scholar intimated in her implied denigration of the Arabic biographies: “[r]ecent Western concepts of what a life is tend to be diachronic, linear, stretching from birth to death, and told so as to reveal character development. In contrast, . . . Islamic biographical material does not present a series of events or cumulative reflections as contributing to character development.”¹⁵

If this were indeed the case of premodern Arabic biographical literature, then should I give up basing my Address on it, having promised to make my Address simultaneously personal and shared—i.e., private and public?

Not at all, and most emphatically so—on the contrary! For, as a group of Arabists and Islamicists have recently pondered in their excellent book *Interpreting the Self* that “Western societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are . . . characterized by a dichotomy in the conceptualization of the self,”¹⁶ where the self exists “in a bifurcated state,” split between private and public, inner and outer,¹⁷ and where there exists “an interior self different from, and even at odds with, the exterior public self;” thus what the autobiography

⁹ See al-Qāḍī, “Alternative History,” pp. 58–59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: the “whole project of the scholars would be a sham” if the contents of biographies were the same.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³ Al-Qāḍī, “Inner Structure and Cultural Significance,” p. 94.

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, p. 42. This made the authors wonder in bewilderment how the autobiography could have emerged from the biography in premodern Arabic literature: “it is difficult to see how

the emergence of autobiography as a literary act can be traced directly to the biographical endeavors that preceded it.”

¹⁵ D. Marcia K. Hermansen, “Survey Article: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Islamic Biographical Materials,” *Religion* 18 (1988), p. 165.

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, p. 245; see also p. 80. The co-authors of this book edited by Reynolds are K. Brustad, M. Cooperson, J. Elias, N. Khoury, J. Lowrey, N. Rabbat, D. Reynolds, D. Stewart, and S. Toorawa.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

actually does, according to modern expectations, is to simply reveal this “interior self.”¹⁸ This “Western self,” whose superiority is assumed, and which presumably explains modern Western “individualism” and “self-awareness,” is thought not to be “found in other societies or other historical periods.”¹⁹ But are these assumptions correct? Is the intense dichotomy in the conceptualization of the self into public and private true in periods earlier than our modern and contemporary ones, and in cultures other than the Western?²⁰ Well, the works of Georg Mirsch and Franz Rosenthal on the Arabic autobiography have proved to be somewhat unproductive precisely because the two authors stuck to the Western model of the autobiography.²¹ This means that an alternative approach, independent of Western assumptions, has to be unearthed.

This alternative consists of approaching the texts of different periods and cultures while one is fully open to questions about the self. Our Arabist scholars suggest asking questions like “Which elements of human behavior are seen as significant to individual identity? Is the human personality seen as essentially unchanging or fluid? Is the human ‘self’ seen as an organic whole such that an individual’s characteristic manner of being (*bios*) is commensurate with the individual?”²² Basing themselves on such questions, when these scholars studied scores of premodern Arabic biographical texts, they came out with a very interesting conclusion:

It does not seem that premodern Arabic autobiographies existed in the same tension-filled space between the public and private, or that this bifurcation of the self is a formulation that would have made any sense to these authors. It is not at all clear that premodern Arabic autobiographers would have interpreted western-style confessions and detailed accounts of love and sex as being any more indicative of an ‘inner’ self than the driest of Arabic autobiographical writings.²³

They also noted, while analyzing a key autobiographical work, that

the work as a whole rejects the concept of ordering a life into a single narrative, a life ‘story’ in the literal sense. Rather, it derives from an intellectual methodology in which classification, categorization, and description were the ultimate tools for the acquisition and retention of knowledge.²⁴

Eureka! This is exactly what I was looking for! The fact that our Arabist authors were concentrating on the premodern Arabic *autobiography* suits perfectly well the points of departure of my Address I outlined above: I would like to talk about matters both personal and shared, and in so doing I would like to emulate the Arabic biographical literature, indeed particularly the autobiographical. And since we now have a fresh, non-Western, approach to this Arabic autobiography, one that is almost totally enveloped in the overarching concept of knowledge, the context of what I want to talk about here is crystal clear.

But there is more of the research of our Arabist colleagues that I would like to highlight. One is the observation that Western autobiography is steeped in a “confessional” mode of expression—just think of Freud’s influence—while the premodern Arabic autobiography is hardly ever confessional. Thus, “some medieval and premodern European autobiog-

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹ For an analysis of Georg Mirsch’s evaluation of “oriental” biographical writings in his four-volume *Geschichte der Autobiographie* (Bonn and Frankfurt,

1949–1969) and Franz Rosenthal’s “Die arabische Autobiographie,” *Studia Arabica* 1 (1937), pp. 1–40, see Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, pp. 20–25.

²² Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, p. 243.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

raphies . . . emphasize the public recognition (“confessions”) of one’s faults, sins, and shortcomings” and their authors seem to say to their readers, “These are the ways in which I have been deficient or in error—beware of similar pitfalls!” On the other hand, the Arab autobiographers think of their works as occasions for celebration, and seem to say to their readers, “These are the ways in which I have enjoyed a moral and productive life—imitate me in them[!]”²⁵ Again, whereas in Western-style autobiographies we find “detailed accounts of love and sex” that aim at laying bare one’s “inner” self,²⁶ such accounts are deemed unfitting for inclusion in the Arabic autobiographies.²⁷

Both these features of the premodern Arabic autobiography suit me well: I think of my journey in the company of knowledge as a celebratory one, and I generally have an aversion to confession, for what it makes of you and of me.

Another area in which the Western autobiography differs from the premodern Arabic one is that the former tends to be a narrative of one’s progression from childhood through youth to adulthood and old age,²⁸ while the latter has its roots deep in history and historical inquiry.²⁹ This is why the Arabic autobiographer presents his work “in categorized accounts describing different aspects of his identity and intellectual activity,”³⁰ and concentrates on those few areas of life which are thought to be “genuine,” namely “the acquisition of knowledge and spiritual understanding, the creation of scholarly and literary works, and the fostering of offspring and students.”³¹ This is why, although a premodern autobiography may be “filled with narratives,” the work as a whole does not present life as a single narrative, but rather as successive “blocks” dealing with knowledge.³² This is a methodology I would be delighted to follow.

There is finally the issue of the purpose or motive of premodern Arabic autobiographies. The authors of these works cite a number of motives, but almost all of them are connected with the dissemination of knowledge, like providing first-hand information for use by later authors or presenting situations or circumstances they have experienced that others might wish to emulate. What is most astonishing, however, is that several authors say that what motivated them to write their works was to “speak of the bounties that God has bestowed upon them” (*al-taḥadduth bi-ni‘mat Allāh*);³³ indeed, one author, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 909/1505), used this expression, which is derived from the Qur‘ān (Q 93:11), as a title for his autobiography.³⁴ Perhaps this is why premodern Arabic autobiographies are fundamentally joyful, even when they recount difficulties—like poverty, childhood failures, occasions of struggle—for the sum total of their life story mirrors how bountiful and generous God has been to them, and how they have celebrated all that in their lives by devoting themselves to the acquisition, retention, and dissemination of knowledge.

Need I say here also that this suits me perfectly? No, I need not. For I emphatically walk in the footsteps of the premodern Arabic biographers in this matter, my shoulders humbly lowered from the weight of the innumerable bounties I have been given in my life, including standing in front of you here today, yet my heart deeply joyful for the opportunity

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 5.

³³ Ibid., pp. 1, 3, 61, 62, 66.

³⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-taḥadduth bi-ni‘mat Allāh*, ed. and trans. E. M. Sertain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī: Biography and Background*, 2 vols. (Cambridge and New York, 1975). For a discussion of it, see Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, pp. 1–4, 66, and *passim*.

to talk about these bounties at the time when I am ending a career only to start a new one, with more bounties, I am sure, and more joy, I hope.

Now that we have behind us the theoretical background which clarifies from where I am coming, both intellectually and methodologically, let me proceed with what I want to talk to you about this afternoon. As you expect, and in emulation of the premodern authors who constructed this huge edifice of Arabic biographical literature, especially in its autobiographical incarnation, I would like to talk about my past journey in the company of knowledge and the aspirations I have for my future journey in the same company. As you would have guessed by now, I will structure my address not in a Western-style “confessional,” “life-story” narrative, but, rather, in a premodern Arabic-style account divided into “blocks,” or stations, that have so far constituted meaningful turning points in my life as a scholar involved with knowledge, and that pretty much dictate the way I expect to spend the next stations in my post-retirement years.

BLOCK I

In the beginning there was Arabic language and the magic I thought it possessed. That was when I was a teenager in tiny Lebanon, and in big Egypt there was Nasser, or, as we knew him in the Arab world, Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. Nasser, of course, is many things, positive and negative; but to me, as to many Arabs of my generation, he was the one who delivered memorable speeches which opened the buds of the Arabic language, lifted its rhetorical potentialities to heights too high to be seen, and made it speak in multiple tongues unknown before. More importantly, perhaps, Nasser linked this language to the history of its people, referenced constantly the symbols of the past, and occasionally peppered his sentences with Qur’ānic expressions, creating an enchanting mix of the the sacred and the secular, the historical and the imminent, and the lofty and the mundane. And from that a much-needed identity of who I am, who we are, emerged, with the Arabic language at its very core. This is when I decided I was going to study Arabic in college and, further, in graduate school. Indeed, in my final year in high school, when I was only seventeen, I took a solemn vow, as teenagers often do, to write a “definitive” grammar of the Arabic language, one that would replace all the “bad” grammars that we had been studying in school year after year!

BLOCK II

In my freshman year in college I discovered that the world was much bigger than I had thought. I started to learn from wherever knowledge came with a ravenous appetite and deep humility, and gone were all the grandiose ideas I had had before, such as writing a “definitive” grammar of Arabic. As a major in Arabic literature at the American University of Beirut, I took many courses in this literature’s various periods, classical and modern, and various genres, poetry and prose. Before my college years were over, it was clear to me that I had no interest in modern Arabic literature, and that Arabic poetry was not my line, either.

My line was prose—it was premodern, classical Arabic prose that captured my imagination. There, there is discrete discipline, a comprehensible message, and a shared foundation between author and audience and between the members of the audience themselves. There is a breadth unrestricted by form, meter, rhyme, length, rhetoric, topic, subject, theme,

or pronounced convention. And while, like poetry, classical prose allowed for making an art of the Arabic language, it, unlike poetry, could be enjoyed beyond aesthetics, emotions, and spotty thought. More importantly, perhaps, prose allowed for broad, almost limitless use in writing about practically anything, from history to zoology and from theology to politics, and in any form conceivable, from the epistle to the treatise, to the essay, to the list, to the pamphlet, to the anthology, to the monograph, and so on and so forth; it could even be accomplished orally, in fine speeches and rousing sermons. Prose, I also concluded, was the vehicle of much of civilization in general, and premodern Arabic prose was the vehicle of much of Islamic civilization. Not surprisingly, thus, the very first paper I wrote for the course on medieval Arabic prose when I was a junior in college was on a theological topic “The Jāhziyya Sect of the Mu‘tazila.” And when a few years later I came to choose my topic for the M.A. thesis, I could envision no better project than to read every word of the books of the greatest premodern Arabic prose writer, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1025), then open my mind, stretch out my arms, and reconstruct his world of Islamic—especially Baghdadi—society in the fourth/tenth century, with its individuals and groups, elite and commoners, patrons and artists, rulers and rebels, ideals and realities, hedonism and spirituality, religion and philosophy, politics and piety, and much, much more. And the project made me enormously happy. Prose, yes, Arabic classical prose is the world whose informative, diverse, and intelligible secrets I would like to uncover.

BLOCK III

My search for a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation proved to be difficult. I knew I wanted to work with Arabic prose; but prose had taken me into many directions. So, for a period of time I was reading almost aimlessly, although little by little I was moving in the direction of theology, and sensing a growing curiosity within myself about sectarianism in early Islam. Then a renowned German authority on Islamic theology visited Beirut and suggested that I write about the very first Shī‘ite sect in Islam, the Kaysāniyya. I quickly said: Yes!

The topic proved to be extremely attractive, since it allowed me to delve into all kinds of source materials and put me right in the heart of my sectarian interests. And there was more, too. The topic proved to be almost bewitching for a young person in her late twenties. It had within its folds anti-establishment rebellions, underground movements, missionary zeal, recruitment tactics, martyrdom, revenge, war, heroism, manifestos, fiery speeches, exotic claims, and men on horses traveling long distances to save wrongfully imprisoned men. And there was also a great deal of idealism: justice, despite all appearances to the contrary, will eventually prevail, for, at the end of time a *mahdī*, a savior, will come, just before the Day of Judgment, kill the unrighteous, vindicate the righteous, and restore justice to the earth as it had been filled with injustice. And there was a lot of rich symbolism and wild ideas that would make you open your eyes wide in awe and wonder: this *mahdī* has not actually died, but has, rather, “disappeared,” gone into occultation, which is why his coming at the end of time is actually a “return” from occultation—not a rise from the dead. And what would he be doing during his occultation? He will be living in Mount Raḍwā, near Medina, talking to angels, drinking water and honey, receiving his sustenance from angels mornings and evenings, and conversing with lions and tigers, with all kinds of animals

living together in inimitable peace.³⁵ There was so much drama, so much imagery, and such mixture of Qurʾānic, *ḥadīth*, and biblical disparate materials! I was captivated—it was all fascinating!

Before finishing writing my dissertation, however, I started having intellectual problems with my sect and the other “extremist” groups that developed from it. Methodologically, I felt uncomfortable with the groups’ delving into unbridled, linguistically unfounded, and eventually fractious interpretations of divine texts. Epistemologically, too, I was ill at ease with the groups’ essential relativization of human knowledge, as absolute knowledge was the domain of only a select few. And then, historiographically, I could not reconcile these groups’ varying and changing visions of history, nor the symbols they created for them. These and similar considerations pushed my research into a new direction: studying not specifically Shīʿism, but more broadly theology and sectarianism as pronounced—and important—phenomena of early Islamic thought and history.

BLOCK IV

The fifteen-year-long civil war in Lebanon, which began in 1975, was another turning point in my career. I am not concerned here with the horrors of war borne by a civilian population; that may or may not have a different occasion. What concerns me here is that the war destroyed all vestiges of law and order, as the state became impotent while competing armed groups and militias snatched its powers and thrived on the perpetuation of chaos, taking the country and society to the edge of destruction.

I emigrated to the United States in 1985. The emigration allowed me, among other things, to observe the situation in Lebanon from a distance, from outside, and it became clear to me then that, without some party that can impose law and order in society, no society can survive intact. At that time my research interest had focused on the epistolography of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750), the distinguished secretary to the first dynasty in Islam, that of the Umayyads (41–132/660–750), and the founder of Arabic literary prose. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd served the Umayyads with inimitable dedication and eloquence for many decades and was with them through thick and thin as their grip over power peaked then slipped in the heartland and the periphery and finally collapsed. His faith in the rightness of their cause, however, never wavered, and he actually formulated a rather sophisticated ideology for them. I was now dealing with a part of premodern Arabic prose that has close connections to the state.

The Umayyad dynasty, like any dynasty, had its share of wrong decisions, missed opportunities, and miscalculated risks; but it certainly was a unique phenomenon in Islamic history at its time. It had dared to change the rules of political ascendancy in Islam by initiating one of the most enduring institutions in Islamic history, namely dynastic rule, much to the chagrin and commotion of the guardians of the old regime, the idealists, and the ambitious. It also dared to take the first Islamic conquests into new, unknown lands, from Spain to India, and, through naval campaigns, to islands in the Mediterranean. It undertook, with no precedent, and with sheer imagination and skill, to transform the administration of

³⁵ For details on the occultation and return of the *mahdī* and their disparate sources, see my *al-Kaysāniyya fī l-tārīkh wa l-adab* (Beirut, 1974), pp. 173–89.

the state from one no more than an extension of the previous empires of Byzantium and Sāsān, into a self-sufficient Muslim state, whose symbols of identity are engraved on monuments, coins, seals, and glass weights and imprinted on government stationary, and whose visionary translation projects made of Arabic the language of intellectual discourse, both religious and secular, for Islamic civilization for many centuries to come. It also made of the state, with its political, economic, and military arms, the locus of power, whose legitimacy may be argued in ideological treatises and speeches, but is in reality based on it being the dominant power that surpasses all other powers in society. Its declared internal policy permitted debate, dissent, and opposition—unless those took a violent, armed form. If they did, then the state's first and foremost duty is to keep law and order for its citizens within its lands.

This brings me back to the civil war in Lebanon and to ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, who, in some of his letters, emphasized the importance of obedience to the caliph—i.e., the state—lest society should fall into catastrophic *fitna*, or civil discord. In his own words:

With disobedience and dissension, blood continues to be spilled unjustly; a child from among the sons of the Muslims is orphaned of his father; prosperity is abandoned; desolation occurs; rancours cling to the hearts; feuds emerge; vengeance are sustained; enmity abides in the souls; fear ascends; a road is intercepted; a woman is widowed; a girl is orphaned; thriving lands are laid waste; . . . an enemy rejoices; . . . a citizenry is lost; an announcer of death howls; a close friend kills his intimate friends; love turns into enmity; and the convergence of bents turns into dispersion.³⁶

Yes, I definitely cannot tolerate gazing at a society in a state of chaos and heading to dissolution from within—neither in reality nor in history. I am now a convert to studying the state, the entity that can, by implementing law and order, prevent society from spiraling into decline and decay—studying its structure, relation to society, and contribution to Islamic thought. I am now light years away from the days when exotic and colorful anti-establishment groups commanded my imagination.

BLOCK V

Studying the state—the Umayyad state—was actually not totally new to me; my studies on ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib had placed me right in the middle of its affairs. Other factors, sometimes unrelated, stepped in to refine and sharpen the focus of my further studies in that area. The first factor was my growing awareness that the onslaught on the authenticity of the Arabic sources waged by revisionist Islamic historians presents a methodological challenge to how early Islamic history is written. Perhaps the best way to face it, I thought, was to diversify the sources used in writing that history, not only in terms of genre, but also in terms of kind, so that more documentary sources are consulted. A second factor stepped in quite unexpectedly to confirm these ideas. That happened during the time I was chairing the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (1991–1997), and a new rule had been introduced, namely that the Department's Chairman is required to chair all dissertation and proposal defenses. Although this exercise was time-consuming, it gave me some of the best education I could have had, especially with regard to the Ancient

³⁶ Iḥsān ʿAbbās, *ʿAbd al-ḥamīd al-kātib wa mā tabaqqā min rasāʾilih wa rasāʾil sālim abī l-ʿalāʾ* (Amman, 1988), pp. 209–10.

Near East, of whose fields I found archaeology to be by far the most fascinating. And I thought: the material evidence at the heart of archaeology was a partial answer to the question of diversifying evidence when writing early Islamic history.

Immediately after the end of my chairmanship, I spent a year in Oxford. There, another factor stepped in to sharpen my sense of how I would like to study the early Islamic state, namely my discovery of the Arabic, Greek, and Coptic papyri that go back to the Umayyad period. The discovery was wondrous for me and, in fact, permanently changed the nature of my research. And, with time wide open before me, with no meetings to attend, reports to write, problems to handle, etc., I delved more into other kinds of documentary materials that have a bearing on our study of the early Islamic state, especially coins, inscriptions, and glass weights. More significantly, as I began to compare these sources with the literary sources so badly bruised by revisionist attacks, a serenity was created in my spirit as a scholar, for I started to see glimpses of more agreement between the literary and documentary sources, and I came to realize that I can be part of the numerous efforts to put the methodological issues plaguing the field on a more solid, reliable footing.

BLOCK VI

While still in Oxford, a question came to my mind as I was preparing to give a lecture on my very own ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib. This accomplished prose writer was a scribe in the Umayyad bureaucracy, and yet the Islamic sources tell us hardly anything about what training he received that allowed him to become a chief scribe, the head of the central, imperial chancery, and the secretary to the last Umayyad caliph. Then suddenly something like a revelation hit me: the papyri are actually written mostly by bureaucrats and discuss things related to the bureaucracy, like payment orders, administrative letters, census directives, accounts, receipts, government-issued documents, projects, etc., and all of these contain literally hundreds of names of people involved in government service, preserve hundreds of texts written by them, and identify innumerable activities in which the state was involved through its bureaucratic machinery. As such, the papyri are a mine of largely untapped original—and authentic—information that dwarfs any other, including that of the Islamic sources on the state’s *kuttāb*. And it was at that point that my mind was made up: my next big state-related project is “The Bureaucracy Under the Umayyads, 41–132/660–750.”

Collecting the material for the project proved to be quite difficult, since I was dealing with an extremely complex task that involves thousands of names, dates, places, offices, structures, procedures, hierarchies, formulas, hands, texts, documents types, etc. It thus became clear to me that, for the first time in my life, I will not be able to work from memory and notes alone: I have to work from a database. But my time in Oxford was drawing to a close, so I thought I would wait until I return to Chicago and then start my database.

But, as we say in a proverbial Arabic verse, winds take ships into directions they do not wish to be taken to (*tajrī r-riyāḥu bi-mā lā tashṭahī s-sufunu*, by al-Mutanabbī). Returning to Chicago ended the open space of sabbatical life and restarted the life of the relentless demands of our profession. As a result, the complex and awesome bureaucracy project had to be put on hold. But it surely did not die, for I concentrated on aspects of it that were manageable within the research time available to me, and wrote papers on the Umayyads’ censuses and land surveys, their stipend registers in Egypt and Ḥimṣ, and the involvement

of the bureaucrats in Iraq in writing Umayyad caliphal history and Iraqi administrative history.

Another way in which I kept the project alive was to give greater consideration to what it entails methodologically, and that in two respects. The first is: what is the relationship between the material that is preserved both in our literary Islamic chronicles and the documentary papyri, and could our very literary sources contain materials that are actually documentary but are not stated to be as such? My latest works on the salaries of judges in early Islam, Kindī's *Kitāb al-quḍāt*, and Abū Zur'a's *Ta'rikh* have helped me see the relationship between the two kinds of sources as complementary or symbiotic, not adversarial, and that reading our literary sources against the backdrop of the documentary materials gives us greater sophistication in handling them. The second methodological issue that I was exploring was the nature of evidence—historical evidence. In a short paper, still unpublished, I wondered whether we, now, in the modern West, are justified in believing that scholars—historians—of other cultures, who lived long before us, thought, like us, that documentary evidence is more valuable than literary evidence—that an original document imparts the truth while, say, the oral statement of an eye witness or a sworn testimony do not. My preliminary conclusions indicate that there is a huge difference between different cultures and different times when it comes to assessing the nature of evidence. Indeed, some Muslim historians sometimes copied documents verbatim but did not bother to highlight their value or to consider them as unique “catches” they should advertise. But this is an issue that I am still working on, and may end up becoming the introduction to my big bureaucracy project.

BLOCK VII

And now that retirement is nigh, my Umayyad bureaucrats and other unpublished pieces and unfinished projects will have the chance to see the light, I hope. I feel I am now at a point in my career where I have both the tools that I need for my research and the clarity of purpose as to what I want to write about.

Provided I have the health, peace of mind, and the kind of quiet Edina, Minnesota, has already provided me with in the past four summers, my aim is to publish a number of books which I have already discussed with Brill, all of which carry the title “Umayyad Studies,” with a number attached to indicate its place in the series, and each of which will include both published and unpublished studies of mine on one particular area. The first volume, *Umayyad Studies 1*, will be on Umayyad historiography; the second on ‘Abd al-Ḥamid al-Kātib; the third on administration; and the fourth I have tentatively called “residency.” In it I try to locate who lived in what kind of house on what street in Umayyad Damascus (and perhaps also Ḥimṣ). To what extent this project will allow me to reconstruct some of the streets of Damascus is still unclear; but it will, I believe, uncover solid new economic and social information such as zoning and population clusters in an urban set-up outside of the ubiquitous Islamic *miṣr* (garrison town) structure.

Another project I have been working on is to reconstruct some five or six fourth-/tenth-century books, now lost, about Umayyad groups of various vocations, from which there are extensive citations in later sources. The availability of electronic media should be of help in accomplishing this rather demanding task, and the work, once finished, should uncover a great deal of valuable materials for future researchers.

I have in mind, finally, one more project, which I see as a tribute to my students over the years, for they have been a major source of inspiration for me, and I would expect that several of them will work with me on it. This is the publication of a definitive edition, with a translation into English, of the *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* of Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/844), one of the earliest, most valuable, and most influential biographical dictionaries of *ḥadīth* scholars in early Islam. As many of you know, this book was first edited, from an incomplete manuscript, and published in nine volumes by Brill, in Leiden, long ago (1904–40). Its missing sections were subsequently found and published in Saudi Arabia, and lately an Egyptian publisher put all the editions together and published the “whole book”—albeit without consulting manuscripts or providing indices for the literally thousands of names in the book. The book thus needs to be put in a definitive, edited, and indexed form. A translation should also accompany the edition, given that the use of the book by historians of early Islam has been so far minimal, because they see it as a *ḥadīth*-folk biographical dictionary and not a hard core chronicle, when in fact it is a most valuable mine of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of pieces of unique information on religion, politics, policy, government, wars, tribalism, sectarianism, marriage alliances, customs, dress, hairdo, pre-Islamic cults and culture, among many, many other topics. As such, a translation of this book is likely to put in the hands of contemporary historians new raw materials from which they can construct new visions of early Islamic history.

Will I be able to accomplish all of this? Only time will tell.

POSTSCRIPT

Let me before concluding, say a few small things. I had said earlier I was averse to confession, but here are a few confessions anyway about what else I would like to do after my retirement.

I am hoping to be able not only to read *about* newly published books in Sunday’s *New York Times* Book Review section but to actually *read* them; not only to read recipes but to actually cook according to their instructions; not only to enjoy listening to music but to also read it; not only to watch many movies but also to join a group of cinephiles like myself and discuss all kinds of film issues with them; not only to go for a quick cup of coffee at the Caribou Coffee house near my place but to take with me a novel by one of my favorite authors, like John Le Carré, and read it at a leisurely pace by the fireside in the cold Minnesota winter; not only to go to the gym to take a quick swim and then rush back home to work but to linger around in the club, or by the lakeside, or in the park, read the newspaper over a cup of coffee or over one of those healthy drinks which I still have to discover, listen to my favorite music, watch the children play and splash in the water, and just sit and see life passing in front of my eyes. Overall, I would like to take time off to do nothing without a sense of guilt, and to live serenely below the radar rather than intensely in the limelight.

Will that happen? I will certainly try. And if you call or visit me, you can find out for yourselves. Surely I will miss much of the good that I have had in Chicago, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for making my sojourn in Chicago and elsewhere so memorable. But it is time to move on, and on I shall move, with much affection left behind.